

THE BATTLE OF HARLAW

HIGHLAND V LOWLAND OR A PRIVATE WAR?

A knight wears plate armour, chainmail and a helmet; the classic image we all associate with medieval warfare, yet this particular representation is featured on a grave slab in the ruins of Kinkell Church by the Ury's banks. This was Gilbert de Greenlaw as he was in life, riding into battle at Harlaw in 1411 never to return home alive. He was a cavalryman fighting for the Earl of Mar, the same Alexander Stewart who in the previous decade had seized his title by forced marriage to Countess Isabel Douglas. Mar was now a respected nobleman, keeping the peace in the Eastern Highlands, fighting in the king's name in Europe, lauded by chronicler Andrew Wyntoun as "honest, able and elegant in person and behaviour." Perhaps his new wife had calmed him down, or else he had now done all he needed to secure his position as a legitimate knight, despite his ignominious beginnings. Yet Mar went into battle against his cousin by marriage, Donald MacDonald, Lord of the Isles over the Earldom of Ross.



Harlaw Monument

The latter was strategically important; it gave the Gaelic ruler a way into mainland Scotland, but equally gave the Lowland scoundrel control of the Highlands.

The whole situation turned on the crook-backed thirteen-year-old Countess of Ross, Euphemia Leslie. Her late father's sister, Marion, was MacDonald's wife, but she was Mar's cousin through her mother, giving the two families a reason to fight. The Duke of Albany, Mar's uncle, had been trying to force the little girl to resign her title to his son, while she became a nun. Her disability meant she was not marriageable material.

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By 1410, MacDonald gathered his fellow Gaels, a force numbering approximately 6,000, and descended on Dingwall and Inverness, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. Word came to Mar that his Highland cousin intended to burn Aberdeen, thus at his Christmas dinner in Kildrummy, he gathered his most powerful friends, including Provost James Davidson of Aberdeen and Bishop Greenlaw, the uncle of Sir Gilbert. Mar promised he would defend the city from these Highland savages. Thus, it was on July 23rd 1411, the Lowland army camped right below their enemies on farmland outside Inverurie between the farmtouns of Harlaw and Balhalgardy, planning to attack MacDonald's men at dawn.

The dubby fields witnessed a slaughter like no other; many Lowland noblemen including Davidson and Greenlaw lost their lives for a conflict that ended with no obvious winner. Sir Gilbert had a coffin and a church burial, probably held by his sorrowing kinsman, the bishop, yet most of the ordinary soldiers were simply buried on the battlefield. Centuries later, farmers would uncover mass graves indicating the level of casualties. Ultimately MacDonald's descendants would inherit Ross, making Harlaw the most dreadful waste of life over a family squabble.